# MEM Awards

**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2024 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award Given at the Annual Meeting of Middle East Medievalists (13 December 2024)**

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First of all, let me thank you, dear colleagues on the board of the Middle East Medievalists, for considering me for your Lifetime Achievement Award. It came as an absolute surprise for me. Looking at the long list of predecessors, I feel deep gratitude and humility—I see so many colleagues on the list whose work I have admired for decades. It is a great honor for me to stand in line with them.

You have invited me to talk about my career but also the field and discipline in general. Talking about my career offers me a great opportunity to recall some of my teachers, friends, and colleagues to whom I owe so much.

My career was not straight. When I finished school, I simply decided to continue what I had been best in: languages. So I enrolled in Romance and Slavonic studies, continuing French and Russian. It could have been clear that a person who did and does these subjects will probably end up as a teacher in high school, and even if I protested that I would not go that way, it was inevitable that I should. I started serving at Hamburg high schools in 1975.

My years at school were a mixed experience. Teaching languages to beginners is highly repetitive, and lessons can be boring, not only for the students but also for the teacher. Looking around for intellectual challenges, I considered learning a non-European language. Against this background, a trip to Morocco in 1982 proved decisive. I was so frustrated that I could not read the traffic signs. Take the stop sign: you understand what it is because it has the same shape and color as the signs you know, but there is something written on it that you cannot read. Now I know: Moroccan stop signs have قف *qif* on them.

So I decided I would take Arabic courses at Hamburg university. Fortunately, these courses began at 5pm, four days a week, so I could attend without neglecting my job. I was incredibly lucky at many points in my career, and here is the first: in one of the very first lessons, I met Albrecht Noth, then professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic at the Hamburg institute. He was a brilliant scholar and also a brilliant teacher, although his teaching did not conform to the rules that I had learned in my professional training.



*Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 33 (2025): v-ix

It was Noth as a person, a scholar, and a teacher who made me continue. He was a trained historian, not a very frequent case back then, and he had chosen the history of the Islamic world as a field because, as he said, he did not want to write the 865th article on Charlemagne. I felt much sympathy for that position. He also said that interdisciplinary research, as far as he was concerned, took place inside the head of the researcher. Maybe a bit too strong a statement, but cogent from someone who could claim overwhelming competence in more than one field. In a way, he was saying that the entire field of Islamic studies, Islamwissenschaft in German, is a fiction, and that it is in fact assembled from several fields, linguistics, literature, religion, history, and others. It is only the academic institutions that do not allow for such a division. I am not sure, however, that integrating Islamic history into departments of History is always a good idea.

My teacher of Persian was Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, the world-famous specialist of the Shahname. He managed not to mention the Shahname even once during his teaching, though, but of course his oceanic knowledge of the older forms of New Persian made itself felt.

Pure philology, philology for its own sake, was a frequent subject for Noth, and pure philologists in Islamic studies were a kind of *bête noire* for him. He was very strict about language skills—linguistically and philologically, your work had to be flawless. But he kept repeating that your work only begins when the philology is done. The various positions scholars in our field could take back then and can still take were present at the Hamburg institute in the 1980s, and it was clear which position was the more rewarding one for me. I am sure I would have dropped out of Arabic after a short while if this option had not been available.

In 1986, I started working on my PhD dissertation, which I had decided would be on Khwāja Aḥrār, a famous Sufi shaykh active in and around Samarkand in the late fifteenth century. Not on his teaching or his Sufi practices, though, but on his landholdings, his business, and his political activity.

In the Soviet period, Muslim Central Asia was the preserve of a very small number of scholars. They studied "Islam in the Soviet Union," as they called it, on the basis of KGB and other regime publications, driven by the desire to see the giant crumble. Their assumption was that the Soviet Union would break up from within under pressure from non-Russian and non-European nations and communities, the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus being an important factor. They did not, however, study the history of Islam in the area, if only because they did not read any of the relevant languages. Yuri Bregel has said everything there is to say about this line of thought, by now largely forgotten.

On the other hand, scholars of Islam and the history of the Islamic world did not do Central Asia. The center of gravity of the field was solidly within the Baghdad-Aleppo-Cairo triangle, and everything beyond that was peripheral. The fate of peripheral subjects in a huge field like the history of the Islamicate world is really a problem. Studying the periphery means that you are on the periphery yourself, including your prospects of getting a job, no matter how central your region of expertise might be for the history of the Islamicate world in general, and Central Asia certainly is central (if you do not discard the center-periphery divide as meaningless altogether).

In the case of Muslim Central Asia, two more obstacles were important: It was and is hazardous to venture into this field without at least some knowledge of Russian, and in order to read the sources, you had and have to know Persian besides Arabic, and, depending on the period, you need Turki as well. The other obstacle was the accessibility of sources that were and still are mostly in manuscript. Accessibility of manuscripts is a political issue, and it continues to be such an issue in the Central Asian post-Soviet republics.

Choosing a Central Asian subject was an option for me because I met most of the linguistic requirements. I did not really know how many problems I might face regarding the access to source material—probably I was naive enough to just hope that people would be nice and cooperative. And they were.

My incredible stroke of luck continued. In 1986, a large congress of Orientalists worldwide was held at Hamburg, the International Congress for Asian and North African Studies. There was a Soviet delegation participating. So I went there and offered my help in very mundane matters. This is how I first met Oleg Fedorovich Akimushkin, a scholar of Iranian and Turanian history based at Leningrad. The Soviet delegation also included scholars from Tashkent.

I had already arranged everything for my first trip to Soviet Central Asia when this congress took place, and in September 1986, I flew to Tashkent via Leningrad.

On my first day in Tashkent, I went to the Beruni institute, the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, Uzbekistan (the Uzbek Socialist Soviet Republic back then), where I knew another congress was held, the Permanent International Altaistic Conference. In front of the building, I met Akimushkin and some more of my new acquaintances, and Oleg Fedorovich saw to it that I was allowed to enter and also to sit in the reading room. This would have been impossible only a couple of years earlier, but with Gorbachev's perestroika, people apparently felt that the old rules were gone, and on the other hand, new rules had not yet been established. This was the first time, then, that I was sitting with Central Asian manuscripts. Don't tell me that these huge international congresses are useless...

The Uzbek colleagues really were helpful, and I'd like to mention Asom Urunbaev in particular, but many more did quite a lot for me as well. When I consider influences from the Soviet academic system, it is impossible not to mention Elena Davidovich whom I had the privilege to meet at her home in Moscow some years later.

One of the main points in Tashkent was that I tried to get microfilms of some manuscripts that were essential sources for my PhD thesis. Months after my return to Hamburg, I received a small parcel from Paris with just these microfilms...

Thus, in many points, I was really lucky. I was utterly naive, but fortunately I met the right people at the right places, and as a result, I got on with my PhD rather quickly, submitting in 1989.

My network expanded. In Tashkent already, I had met Devin DeWeese who was working also on certain aspects of Central Asian Sufism, and our paths have crossed very frequently since then. I found out that Jo-Ann Gross had been working on the same figure as I did, but learned that this was not so bad when I met her in London in 1987. In North America in the

1980s, there was a constellation of emerging scholars on Timurid Iran and Central Asia, and I met Maria Eva Subtelny, Beatrice Manz, and Robert McChesney at the MESA meeting in Toronto in 1988. This was also the first time I saw Bert Fragner, a towering figure in Iranian studies, a most gifted organizer and facilitator, inspiring as a scholar and as a person. His hospitality, his wit, and his sense of irony are legendary. I met Roy Mottahedeh only much later, but his work had been a major inspiration right from the start, and thus it was an honor for me when he asked me to co-edit "Cities of Medieval Iran" (published with Brill in 2020) together with him and David Durand-Guédy.

France and the French academic world have continued as a strong factor throughout my academic life. Everyone interested in Muslim Central Asia would come to the French Institute in Tashkent, the Institut Français d'Etudes sur l'Asie Centrale, IFEAC, from its establishment in 1993 to 2010 when it had to leave. I had the privilege to serve on its Scientific Board, Conseil scientifique, from 1994 until the early 2000s. Pierre Chuvin, the Institute's first director, is dear to my memory. He managed to turn the IFEAC premises into a well-protected island of French esprit and savoir-vivre, skillfully defending it against all kinds of dangers.

The IFEAC was a basis for establishing cooperation with scholars in Uzbekistan, and many colleagues made ample use of this opportunity. I certainly did. All the cooperative projects I managed in the late 1990s and in the 2000s were possible only because of this basis.

In 1993, I finished my habilitation, which was on "Rulers, Communities, and Intermediaries in Eastern Iran and Transoxiana in the Pre-Mongol Period" (published in German in 1996 with Steiner), and after returning to teaching high school for a last time, I finally was hired as professor at Halle in 1995.

Halle is in what used to be the GDR. After the end of this Soviet satellite in Germany, profound changes took place, and they did not bypass the academic system. Many people who had been too close to the system and had served, for instance, as informers for the Stasi, the secret police in the GDR, had to evacuate their positions. Moreover, many departments were restructured, and in the general euphoria of these first years of building civil society in East Germany, large funds were available for all kinds of projects, including new professorships. This meant that in the mid-90s, in our field as well as in others, there were more open positions than had been earlier or have been since then.

Again, I was lucky. In Halle, they explicitly asked for someone with expertise in a region of the Islamic world. Regions "on the periphery," that is, regions where Arabic is not the main language, evidently were part of the deal.

Under the gifted leadership of Stefan Leder, professor for Arabic and Islamic Studies at Halle, we all worked together to get our institute out of provincial mediocrity. And I think we succeeded: scholars who were early career scholars back then now are established scholars in many places, and they remember their Halle years as most fruitful.

Looking at my career today, I think two points are important:

- Give career change a chance
- Take people from the periphery seriously

It is really gratifying to learn that MEM has taken decisions to broaden its bases: the Middle East stretches far to the west and the east, to the south and the north, and Muslim Central Asia surely is an important part of it.

For the field in general, I want to mention only one point. It is one of the things I remember as Noth's legacy, and it is gratifying to see that so many colleagues are doing history that way: get beyond the kings and wars, and do history beneath the royal level. This is what I have tried to do in most of my research, using various approaches and testing a number of fields. For this, historians of the Middle East, medievalists as well as modernists, need some kind of professional training in history. It is perhaps then no longer of prime importance whether interdisciplinary research is going on within the head of one scholar only or whether there is a team of scholars, as long as people are aware of the potential that the fusing of linguistic expertise and history holds.